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The Historical Position *of* Princeton Seminary

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New York
February, 1928

THIS IS A SUBJECT which claims the consideration of the Presbyterian Church because of the decision of the last Assembly to establish for the Seminary a single board of control, this to take the place of a dual administration by a Board of Directors and a Board of Trustees. Will this proposed change overthrow or imperil the historic position of the Seminary?

The Presbytery of Chester has adopted and sent to all the Presbyteries for their concurrence a Protest "believing that a crisis has arisen in Princeton Theological Seminary, and that its historic position is endangered by the proposed changes in the report of the Special Committee to visit Princeton Theological Seminary and adopted by the General Assembly meeting in San Francisco." In order to understand this historic position, it is well to refer to official actions recently taken concerning it.

At a meeting of the Board of Directors held October 13, 1925, reference was made to the historic position of the Seminary. A committee of seven had been appointed to investigate "the internal affairs of the Seminary on the basis of which there had been distrust, dissension, division and distressing publicity." This committee, having conferred with all the members of the Faculty reported as follows:

> "1. Your Committee has found every member of the faculty entirely loyal to the standards of our Church and to the pledge required by the Seminary. There is no room for doubt or criticism as to the faith or teaching of any professor or instructor in the Seminary.
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> "2. Such differences as have arisen are not due to doctrinal discord in the faculty but to the different attitude of the members of the faculty to the discussion of questions which are agitating the whole Christian world and to temporary conditions involving the personal relations of members of the Seminary to the government of our church. If in these matters there is not the same unity that there is in matters of faith and doctrine, the members of the faculty in their conduct and writing are entitled to exercise that liberty of action and of opinion which is fundamental to our faith and form of government and particularly to the *historic* attitude of this Seminary."

At a meeting of the Board of Trustees, June 17, 1927, in response to the official notice of the Assembly's action regarding the appointment of a Committee of Eleven to prepare a Plan for a single board of control, it was resolved

> "That this Board express to the Assembly's Committee its loyalty to the historical theological position of Princeton Theological Seminary in relation to the Standards of the Presbyterian Church, and its desire that nothing shall be done to impair this theological position of Princeton Theological Seminary in the plan of reorganization."

The committee appointed by the General Assembly of 1926, "to make a sympathetic study of conditions affecting the welfare of Princeton Seminary and to cooperate responsively with Seminary leaders in striving to adjust and harmonize differences," in its report to the Assembly in San Francisco deplored the divisions and hostilities whereby the "good name of Princeton is being injured and the effect of the historic testimony of the Seminary to the Reformed Faith in its purity and integrity is being jeopardized."[1]

The allusion of the Special Committee to Princeton's historic testimony to the Reformed Faith would signify a *doctrinal position* which ought not to be jeopardized. That position is simply one of unquestioned loyalty to the Standards of the Presbyterian Church. It is clearly expressed in the following paragraph from the Design of the Seminary:

> "It is to form men for the gospel ministry, who shall truly believe, and cordially love, and therefore endeavor to propagate and defend, in its genuineness, simplicity, and fulness, that system of religious belief and practice which is set forth in the Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and Plan of Government and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church; and thus to perpetuate and extend the influence of true evangelical piety, and gospel order."[2]

It is also embraced in the formula which every professor on being inaugurated shall subscribe:

> "In the presence of God, and of the Directors of this Seminary, I do solemnly and *ex animo* adopt, receive, and subscribe the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as the confession of my faith, or as a summary and just exhibition of that system of doctrine and religious belief, which is contained in Holy Scriptures, and therein revealed by God to man for his salvation; and I do solemnly, *ex animo*, profess to receive the Form of Government of said Church, as agreeable to the inspired oracles. And I do solemnly promise and engage not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict or contravene, either directly or impliedly, anything taught in the said Confession of Faith or Catechisms, nor to oppose any of the fundamental principles of Presbyterian Church Government, while I shall continue a professor in this seminary."[3]

This declaration is, as it always has been, effective in securing a staff of instructors who are loyal to the doctrinal position of the Seminary. The present

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1. General Assembly Minutes, 1927, p. 131.
2. Plan of the Seminary, p. 17.
3. Plan of the Seminary, p. 26.

Board of Directors have placed themselves unanimously on record concerning the present Faculty to this effect: "There is no room for doubt or criticism as to the faith or teaching of any professor or instructor in the Seminary," and that every member of the Faculty has been found "entirely loyal to the standards of our Church and to the pledge required by the Seminary."

The Protest of Chester Presbytery would make the historic position of the Seminary turn on a question of organization. It is the proposed changes in management which endanger, as this Presbytery sees it, the position which Princeton has held through all the past years.

The two *constants* by which the doctrinal position of Princeton has been safeguarded since 1811 have been the General Assembly and certain deeds of gift since 1824 administered by the Board of Trustees.

The terms of *large trust funds* have a direct bearing upon the Seminary's doctrinal testimony. A number of them specify as an unalterable condition to their use that the Seminary shall continue "under the supervision and control of the General Assembly," and that certain doctrines shall continue to be taught, e.g., universal and total depravity, election, atonement, imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, etc., etc. It is moreover laid upon the Trustees as an obligation to see to it that these doctrines of the Reformed Faith are taught and that there shall be no departure from the supervision and control of the Assembly. One deed, that of John C. Green and his wife, dated January 21, 1861, provides that if a majority of the professors, or particularly the one occupying the "Helena chair," shall depart from the doctrines of our Confession and those having the power of removal *shall not on notice from the Trustees or any three of them* restrain or discharge him or them, the property and funds in question shall be forfeited. One deed of gift further stipulates that the Library and its funds and officers shall be under the direction of the Board of Trustees.[1] It will thus be seen that the Board of Trustees in Princeton Seminary, whatever their function may be in other seminaries or church organizations, is not a mere holding corporation. It is to manage the funds as a corporation agreeable to the intention of the donors.[2] The unanimous opinion of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts rendered September 18, 1925, declaring that the proposed merger of Andover Theological Seminary with the Harvard Divinity School would be a violation of the provision of trust funds and therefore illegal is illuminating in its bearing upon the situation in Princeton Seminary.

The other *constant* recognized by deeds of gift and the Plan as maintaining the historical position of the Seminary, is the *General Assembly*. From 1811 to

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1. Deed of gift from the Residuary Legatees of John C. Green, dated June 12, 1877.
2. Plan of the Seminary, p. 4.

1870, or for more than one half of the Seminary's life, the General Assembly had the immediate direction of the Seminary. The original Plan states: "As this institution derives its origin from the General Assembly, so that body is to be considered at all times as its patron and the fountain of its powers. The Assembly shall accordingly ultimately sanction all its laws, direct its instructions, and appoint its principal officers." For the proper inspection and control of the Seminary, the Assembly chose a Board of Directors. In cases of necessity the Directors might employ a suitable person to perform the duties of a professor till a meeting of the Assembly should take place. All the professors of the Seminary were appointed by the Assembly.

At the time of the reunion in 1870, it seemed desirable to secure some common basis for the Seminaries of the Old School Church which had been directly under the supervision and control of the General Assembly, and for New School Seminaries which had been organized independently of the Assembly. The Directors of Princeton Seminary at that time, somewhat chary of a united Assembly in which the influence of New School men would be strong, petitioned the Assembly for a relative autonomy or independence, such as Union and Auburn Seminaries enjoyed. But the answer of the Assembly to the Princeton Directors was: "Inasmuch as the endowments of this Seminary are held on the condition that it should be the property and under the control of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, that trust cannot be vacated nor transferred to any other body."[1]

For its own guidance in the supervision and control of the Seminary the Assembly had in 1811 adopted *"the Plan."* This cannot be regarded as a compact with the Seminary or its Directors. It was devised before the Seminary existed. It is an instrument which the Assembly has felt free to modify from time to time. Article I, Section 3, specifies that amendments to the Plan must be proposed at one Assembly and not adopted until the Assembly of the subsequent year except by unanimous vote. However, amendments have been frequently made and there is no record of any amendments having been postponed for the consideration of an ensuing Assembly or of unanimous consent for immediate action having been obtained. The Plan was adopted on the report of a committee of seven which had been appointed a year before by the Assembly of 1810.[2]

On the report of the Standing Committee on Theological Seminaries the Plan was amended in 1870 to meet the exigencies of reunion.[3] The main change at the time was in Article 2, whereby the Directors were given power to elect their

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1. Presbyterian Digest, Vol. II, p. 585.
2. Presbyterian Digest, Vol. II, p. 428.
3. General Assembly Minutes, 1870, p. 65.

own members and also the professors, subject to the veto of the General Assembly.

In 1871 the Assembly received an inquiry from Auburn Seminary regarding the time within which the Assembly may exercise the veto of the election of professors in seminaries.[1] On recommendation of the Committee on Theological Seminaries the following amendment to the Plan of the Seminary was adopted:

> "The Assembly declares that the true meaning of the act subjecting the election of a professor to the veto of the Assembly is that such election be reported to the next General Assembly thereafter; and if not vetoed by that Assembly, the election shall be regarded as complete according to the Plan ratified by the Assembly of 1870."[2]

This action, taken at the suggestion of Auburn Seminary and without consulting the Directors of Princeton Seminary, raises the question as to the relevancy of actions, taken by the Assembly from year to year, to the Plan of the Seminary. The Board of Directors have interpreted the Assembly action of 1871 just quoted as being an amendment to the Plan. At a meeting held October 12, 1926, the report of a special committee embodied this statement which was spread upon the minutes of the Board: "If the Assembly does not veto the election of a professor at the next meeting after his election, it has no longer power to act thereon." There is no stipulation to this effect embodied in the present Plan.

The action of the Assembly of 1870 was modified by the Assembly of 1894 in the following action:

> "That the election, appointment or transfer of all professors and teachers in all seminaries shall be submitted to the next succeeding General Assembly for its approval, and that no such election, appointment or transfer shall take effect, nor shall any professor or teacher be inducted into office until his election, appointment or transfer shall have been approved by the said General Assembly; failure of the General Assembly to which the said elections, appointments or transfers are reported for approval to act thereon shall be regarded as approval thereof, and that all of said professors and teachers shall be either ministers or members in good standing of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

This action was manifestly intended to supersede the action of the Assembly of 1871 already quoted. If the Assembly may take action at any time, as was done

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1. General Assembly Minutes, 1871, p. 579.
2. General Assembly Minutes, 1871, p. 581.

in 1871 and 1894, bearing upon the provisions of the historic Plan of Princeton Seminary, the contention that any change in the Plan must be proposed at one Assembly in the form of a clearly defined action, and not adopted until the Assembly of the subsequent year cannot be sustained.

In connection with the controversy which has been going on in the Presbyterian Church during the past four or five years, the historic position of the Seminary has been interpreted as demanding the assumption of an *ecclesiastical* attitude more or less hostile and divisive in its aim towards a large number of ministers in good and regular standing in the Presbyterian Church.

So far as the undefined and unauthorized terms "fundamentalist" and "modernist" apply to great evangelical doctrines, Princeton Seminary can have only one historic position. She must stand unequivocally, as she now does, for the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures as defined in our Confession, for the absolute Deity and atoning sacrifice of our Lord, His supernatural birth and resurrection and His return to judge the earth—in fact, the whole system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith. The basic evangelical doctrines, as already noted, must not only be taught in the Seminary, but effectively taught with the purpose of forming for the gospel ministry men who shall truly believe, cordially love, and endeavor to propagate and defend such doctrines. Thus considered Princeton Seminary must ever remain conservative and fundamentally evangelical.

But the problem of maintaining evangelical beliefs in our Church, and of eradicating naturalistic and unevangelical beliefs, is an ecclesiastical one concerning which Directors, Trustees, Professors may differ as to ways and means consistent with the liberty "which is fundamental to our faith and form of government, particularly to the historic attitude of this Seminary."[1]

When it was first proposed to established one Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, fear was expressed lest such a large institution might become scholastic without a corresponding spirit of real piety, and lest such an agency with its dominating influence might attempt to supplant the courts of the Church. Assurances were given to the Church by the Assembly that the Seminary would not infringe upon the constitutional rights of Presbyteries or Synods, and as is implied, would not seek to dominate in ecclesiastical matters.[2] The original Faculty recognized this subservient relationship of the Seminary to the Church.

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1. Action of Board of Directors, October 13, 1925.
2. Presbyterian Digest, Vol. II, p. 429.

We are told in the biography of Dr. Archibald Alexander,[1] the first professor, who deserves to be called the founder of the Seminary, that he never chose to make himself prominent in the agitations of the Church. "To this course," his biographer states, "he was led by a temper eminently moderate and pacific, which some denominated timidity; partly by views which he entertained concerning the function of a theological professor as to a certain degree withholding him from the field of strife; but more than all by his inability to coincide with many respected brethren as to the particular means by which acknowledged evils were to be remedied." With this attitude his colleagues, Samuel Miller and Charles Hodge, were in full accord.

By these men the historic *ecclesiastical* position of the Seminary was established and maintained for more than half a century. In the controversies preceding the division of the Church in 1837, these men belonged unequivocally to the Old School conservative party. They recognized the fact that men of unsound views had entered the ministry of the Church and were propagating pernicious doctrines. These errors of "a malignant and dangerous character" they denounced as being irreconcilable with our Confession of Faith as being adapted to undermine all the fundamental doctrines, and as being in a high degree unfriendly to vital piety.

And yet the ecclesiastical views of these Seminary professors exposed them to the severe criticism of their "ultra-conservative Old School brethren." "The Gentlemen of Princeton" were designated sometimes with a sneer as "the middle party," "Moderates," "the head and fount of moderatism."[2] The Seminary became the object of suspicion and fear. The Synod of Philadelphia passed a vote which amounted to a formal declaration of want of confidence in the Seminary.[3] The danger of having the Seminary pass from Old School to New School control seemed to be such that a group of men had well nigh resolved to establish another Seminary, and had gone so far as to select a site and place funds in the bank for the undertaking.[4] What gave offence to the then "ultra-partizans who have for several years past divided and agitated our church" were two articles published in *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review conducted by an Association of Gentlemen in Princeton,* one in 1834, entitled "The Act and Testimony"; the other in 1835, entitled "The Present State and Prospects of the Presbyterian Church." Regarding these articles *The Presbyterian*, in an editorial comment,[5] made this statement: "We rest under the most painful conviction that the articles emanating from Princeton, connected as they are with the high influence in that quarter, have done more to produce hesitation in the

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1. Life of Archibald Alexander, p. 471.
2. Life of Samuel Miller, Vol. II, p. 253.
3. Life of Charles Hodge, p. 306.
4. Life of Samuel Miller, Vol. II, p. 316.
5. *The Presbyterian*, April 16, 1835.

minds of many who were anxious to adopt any reasonable measure of reform, and thus to defeat any direct assault upon the errors which have become prominent in the Church, than could have been effected by all the combined forces of the New School." These two articles written by Dr. Alexander or by Dr. Miller, and endorsed by other members of the Faculty, Charles Hodge and Dr. Joseph Addison Alexander, indicate very clearly the historic position of the Seminary in a time of doctrinal controversy.[1] Allusion is made by them to the lack of even "tolerable discretion" in the management and presentation of Old School principles. "We have often thought that if our brethren of the Philadelphia Presbytery and Synod had really intended to make their own defeat in the General Assembly certain, and to render the Presbyterian Church 'a hissing and a by-word' throughout the land, they could scarcely have taken a more direct course than on several occasions they did, to attain their end. We say this with unspeakable pain, but with unwavering confidence; as we know it to be the deliberate opinion of hundreds who ardently wish well to the old-school cause, and mourn over all its disasters."[2]

These "gentlemen of Princeton" held what would be regarded by some today as a "complacent view" of the situation in the Presbyterian Church. As already noted they recognized the errors of a dangerous and malignant character which had crept into the church and the necessity of dealing with them promptly and faithfully in the spirit of our public standards. "But," we read further, "while we make these acknowledgments and mourn over the evidence which constrains us to make them, we see no reason to believe that the evil in question is either so extensive or so deeply seated as some excellent brethren imagine. . . . After making every allowance for this kind of denial, concealment, and prevarication, which seem always to be more or less connected with the errors alluded to, we are persuaded that nine-tenths of our ministry are in a great measure free from the unsound opinions in question."[3] . . . "The truth is, we totally disbelieve that corrupt opinions exist among the ministers and elders of our church, to the extent that is proclaimed by some." "Our counsel is," they declare, "not that we should overlook, or close our eyes against, corruption in doctrine or in practice in the church; but that we should guard against a predisposition to find it where it is not; to magnify it where it exists; or to place individuals in the list of heretics without sufficient evidence."

These Seminary fathers opposed the employment of extra-confessional tests, e.g., Assembly deliverances, for the eradication of doctrinal corruption. They contended that the Act and Testimony, with the doctrinal contents of which

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1. Life of Samuel Miller, Vol. II, p. 271.
2. *Biblical Repertory,* 1835.
3. *Biblical Repertory,* 1835, p. 64.

they were in entire accord, had been perverted from its true and legitimate use as a Testimony into an invidious Test Act, calculated to divide the church.[1]

They maintained that every effort to reform the church, or to promote its purity and edification should be made in a constitutional way, i.e., through the medium of regular constitutional judicatories. They referred to Old School men who found it more easy to make sweeping assertions regarding corrupt opinions in the Church, or complain to the General Assembly by signing an Act and Testimony, than to do their duty as members of their respective Presbyteries. "How has it happened," they inquire, "that for a number of years past a charge of heresy has never been brought before the Assembly in such a manner by reference, appeal or complaint, as enabled that body to take regular cognizance of it except in a single instance? And even that was connected with so many peculiar personal local circumstances as rendered a calm and dispassionate decision of it all but impracticable."[2]

The ultra Old School men of that day attempted to run a dividing line through the Church by the employment of an extra-confessional Test Act, and a movement was started to run a similar line of division through the student body of Princeton Seminary. At the Assembly of 1835 a resolution was introduced to the effect that the Assembly should appoint a committee to prepare a doctrinal test to be used in excluding from the Seminary students whose beliefs might be regarded as unsound. Although the resolution was not adopted by the Assembly, in the July number of *The Biblical Repertory,* 1835, the Princeton professors made the following comment: "Has it never happened that young men, who entered a theological seminary with all their prepossessions hostile to the peculiar doctrines of its teachers, have been completely reconciled and convinced of their truth? Or if this complete conversion does not take place, is it not better (asuming the orthodoxy of the teachers) that these young men if they are to enter the church, should have an opportunity of learning what orthodoxy is from its advocates, rather than from the misrepresentations of its opposers? Is error so much more powerful than truth, that we should dread their collision as fatal to the latter? For our part we heartily wish that all the young men, provided they be sincerely pious, whose prepossessions are unfavorable to orthodoxy, might pass through an orthodox seminary. If they do not prove better ministers and more correct theologians than if driven to institutions of an opposite character, we think something must be sadly amiss with orthodoxy or its teachers. It is not seemly for the advocates of truth to be too timid. If it cannot defend itself, we shall have to give it up."

These moderate Old School men of the Seminary Faculty (Drs. Alexander, Miller and Hodge) urged not only the faithful employment of constitutional

1. *Biblical Repertory,* 1834, p. 506.
2. *Biblical Repertory,* 1835, p. 65.

methods, according to a Form of Government which they believed was founded on the Word of God; they also sought to honor Presbyterianism through the inculcation of a Christian spirit. Two quotations will suffice: "Let us, one and all, strive to hold up Presbyterianism to view, not as a system of everlasting conflict and bickering; not as an ecclesiastical constitution chiefly adapted to promote and regulate the forms of ecclesiastical warfare; but as a system of fraternal union and cooperation, and better adapted than any other to bind all its constituent members together as 'one body in Christ, and every one members of one another'." "And let us, with one consent, endeavour to make all the meetings of our respective judicatories, from the highest to the lowest, chosen opportunities for nourishing and extending practical piety, benevolent effort, and enlarged desires of evangelical usefulness. No spirit is better adapted to kill heresy than this; especially when it is manifested in the greatest degree, and in the most active manner, by the friends of old-school orthodoxy."

Drs. Alexander, Miller and Hodge could not prevent, as they strove to do, the division of 1837. But they were wise pilots of the Seminary in a stormy period, and as their Old School biographers record, they made a substantial contribution to conservative faith and order. Since their day two unions of the Presbyterian Church have made, as the former President of the Seminary, Dr. Patton, declares, "the recognition of a certain area of tolerated difference of opinion a moral obligation."[1] He goes on to say, "We need discernment not only in distinguishing between truth and error, but also between the truths of greater and those of minor importance. But how is this area of tolerated divergence to be decided? So far as it concerns the church which I have the honor to serve, my belief is that it can only be decided by the General Assembly in a judicial case properly coming before it from the court of original jurisdiction. The General Assembly can impose no new terms of subscription, and as a commentary on or as an interpretation of the Confession of Faith or an *in thesi* deliverance would be the equivalent to the making of a new term of subscription, such actions should not be taken as the basis of a judicial decision."

In the light of the foregoing, the historic position of the Seminary must be interpreted to mean:

1. Absolute loyalty to the Standards of the Presbyterian Church as enjoined and safeguarded by the General Assembly, which has the power of supervision and control, and by deeds of gift for the maintenance of whose provisions the Board of Trustees is held responsible.

2. Insistence upon constitutional methods of government and discipline in dealing with error and corruption within the Presbyterian ministry. The pro-

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1. Fundamental Christianity, p. 140.

fessors are pledged not to oppose any of the fundamental principles of Presbyterian Church government. Princeton Seminary is a Presbyterian institution.

3. The right and duty to change the organization of the Seminary whenever necessary for the better accomplishment of its Design so long as the historic safeguards as vested in the General Assembly and in trust funds are not destroyed or impaired.

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